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## Healthier Buildings and a Happier Workforce — WELL, Fitwel and WiredScore Put People First and Forward-Thinking Companies Like Midway Are Embracing Next Level Offices

A Better Way of Living and Working

BY TARRA GAINES // 03.29.21



1 Like most of Midway's signature developments, CityCentre is built around the green in many  
8 ways.

**I**f the past year has taught Texans anything, it might be: Don't take the fundamentals for granted. From the air we breathe to clean water, everyone needs healthy environments to thrive. And the stats prove it.

A 2018 survey of office workers conducted by the U.S. Green Building Council found that people who work in certified green buildings are happier, healthier and more productive than people who work in conventional buildings. Almost everyone is at least aware of LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certification

these days, but future thinking developers are focused on a new level of healthy buildings. One that is about what is good for people as much as what is good for the environment.

WELL certification puts people first — the employees who make up the true heart of any company. The team from Houston-based real estate investment and development company Midway is committed to creating these type of people-first environments. Midway has already achieved LEED gold or silver status on most of its developments. Now, it's reaching even higher.

“Your physical and social environment — where you sit and who you sit next to — have a greater bearing on your health and well-being than your access to health care, your genetics and your lifestyle and behaviors combined,” says Rachel Hodgdon, president and CEO of the International Well Building Institute.

WELL certification centers around 10 concepts such as air, water, light and sound, aspects of daily living that you might never notice until something disturbs those fundamentals of life. To earn high WELL scores, developers need to strive for the best in moisture management, air quality, use of sustainable materials for building, combustion, water quality and even sound quality.

Those WELL concepts include more sweeping ideals, like nutrition and mind. Even the snacks offered in a building's vending machines might get checked during the certification process.

“It's a holistic approach to the wellbeing of your tenants,” says Bo Sanford, Executive Vice President and Chief Risk Officer for Midway. Sanford notes how the outdoors becomes a central component when designing — something Midway has been committed to since its groundbreaking CITYCENTRE mixed-use development was first being planned.

“There's a focus on outdoor amenities, whether bringing more fresh air inside or sunlight into the space,” Sanford says. “But it's also having these opportunities for your tenants, your users to have a natural connection to the outside.” 

Of course, Midway is already known for its outdoor green spaces. CITYCENTRE Plaza and Century Square's The Green, both big event, gathering and leisure green spaces, make the case for developing with an eye towards the outside. When Midway took over the GreenStreet mixed-use development downtown, its overhaul included making sure its new three-story, soaring tower lobby opened onto The Lawn, an expansive green space.

Yes, you can now picnic downtown — right outside your offices. Or kick a soccer ball around.

Midway's mixed-use Buffalo Heights development along bustling Washington Avenue in Houston, just a few blocks from Buffalo Bayou Park, also shows how city living can be green living.

“When you walk outside of the building, you’ll feel that you are someplace, not just a big sea of parking,” Sanford says “With the oak trees we’ve preserved and niches of seating, just the softening of the hardscape out there, we feel like we’ve been about to achieve a comfort zone in the outdoors.”

Keeping with that holistic approach, Sanford says basic design tweaks like stairway placement can lead to incremental, but real, lifestyle improvements for residences of Midway properties.

“One pet project of mine for the last couple of years is having staircases that are easy to find and once you find them, they feel like you’re supposed to use them,” he says. “We’re really starting to see that when we make it user friendly, people will use them.”

GreenStreet's new lobby includes a dramatic staircase in the center of the lobby that isn't just striking. It is also people friendly, providing a much more open and welcoming feel.

## Building Offices of the Future



WELL and WiredScore, which is all about connectivity, may be relatively new. But these next level standards are going to be more important than ever in a post COVID-19 pandemic world. Smart companies are already starting to realize that getting people back into the office hinges on having an office that puts people and their needs first.

“I do think there’s pressure on really making that office space as compelling as possible,” Midway CEO Jonathan Brinsden says. “It’s not just the specific place, it’s the context that it’s in. Does that office have walkable access to restaurants and retail and fitness? And outdoor green space and all the things I think that are important to team members.”

Midway is already committed to building these tomorrow world offices, which can be seen in GreenStreet’s completely revamped office buildings and CITYCENTRE’s array of office options, including the showcase CITYCENTRE 6, which is coming soon.

The reinvention of GreenStreet has upped the ante for destinations of its kind.

“If you’re going to bring them back, your office space needs to be compelling,” Brinsden says. “And have amenities — and be a space where people want to come back as opposed to working from home. In a way, COVID didn’t create new trends. It just accelerated a lot of trends that we’re in position to take advantage of.”

Pushing for the highest possible standards and making healthier offices environments can bring rewards to almost everyone. Forward-thinking companies know that the days of getting by with an outdated office that’s just sort of there no longer makes anything close to business sense either.

“I think tenants do understand what we do has real value and is where the world is going,” Brinsden says.

Midway’s CITYCENTRE certainly embodies that dynamic and upscale village within a city feel. Yet residents, workers and shoppers might not realize they are also spending their days and nights in a more sustainable environment. Midway believes

this mixed-use model is a “fundamental aspect of sustainability.”

“It’s not something we’ve invented,” Sanford says, “But it’s something we’ve embraced.”

## Scoring Green

Earning silver or gold status for a certification such as LEED requires vision and focus from the very beginning of a new development. But achieving WELL certification is arguably even tougher. Midway has already committed to achieving that next level, that people first level, in its developments.

“From the outset you want to make sure to make your sustainability objective known to your design team, that everybody is on the same page and recognizes what the intent is,” Sanford says.

GreenStreet is a destination focused on lifestyle, putting health and wellbeing as a priority.

Midway can’t always start from the foundation up, like when it acquired GreenStreet. Yet, they can go back in and level up a facility making it a more sustainable and comfortable environment for all. Underneath GreenStreet’s revamped airy decor, the venue boasts enhanced air quality, water and mechanical systems, earning another certification suited to a renovated property.

“We spent a lot of time and effort to try to make it a more user friendly and approachable project,” Sanford says. “It’s one that we’re very proud of being able to state that we’ve achieved Fitwel certification.”

Fitwel looks at health as an entire interconnected system. This is rigorous, third-party healthy building certification system operated by the Center for Active Design (CfAD).

It takes more than just improving a few things to reach Fitwel certification.



“We are entering a new era, one where health is a defining factor in real estate investment decisions,” CfAD president Joanna Frank says. “The rising use of Fitwel is creating more detailed and sophisticated property-specific data sets that our users can leverage to respond to shifting demands and remain at the forefront of the healthy building movement.”

## Getting Wired

Alongside LEED and Fitwel, other building rating systems focus on additional necessities of daily work. Midway is also committed to achieving a high [WiredScore](#), which aids developers in improving and promoting a property’s digital connectivity and infrastructure.

“When you have a company that is really tech savvy, and we have a number of those tenants in our project — Amazon Web Services at CITYCENTRE and Google at Buffalo Heights — for these types of companies, the quality of the digital infrastructure, is extremely important,” Sanford says.

Striving for these types of certifications, doesn’t necessarily make for flashy headlines or easy-to-touch attractions, but daily working and living becomes healthier and maybe even a little lighter.

“Most of the things will not be visible but they’ll make the experience better,” Sanford says. “You don’t always know the quality of the air you are breathing. You might notice your building seems quieter.

“You may notice that we’ve taken additional steps in controlling noise, but you don’t necessarily notice the water tastes better or the air feels a little cleaner. That’s a little hard to quantify.”

A commitment for sustainable development and working towards these green certifications can make for big, dramatic innovations to a project, like those outdoor plazas and event spaces that become the central hub for many of Midway’s development. But it can also lead to smaller, buzz-worthy initiatives and partnerships that just make life a bit better.



Take the case of the latest tiny residents living and working at Midway's new East River mega development. Within this sprawling development alongside Buffalo Bayou, urban beekeeping company Alvéole has set up two hives with plans for an East River private label honey.

Bees find a new place to live and work at East River.

Working with local stakeholders and community leaders in the Fifth Ward, Midway also has an East River community garden in the works.

Even though residents and visitors of a property might not always understand the commitment made to make the fundamentals as sustaining and life affirming as possible, it can give them a sense of wellbeing they will remember.

“Somebody sees that this is a Midway project and it sets that expectation,” Sanford says. “It helps us manage expectations and instill an awareness. It will offer if not a competitive advantage, at least a sense of comfort that people can take away that this project has sought to separate itself from the crowd by seeking these levels of certifications.”

Sure earning green cred can be good for business and gives Midway an edge in the push for a better tomorrow, especially when residents are looking to live, work and enjoy a sustainable lifestyle more than ever, but Sanford says it's also about being a good neighbor.

“We just think providing those healthy systems and a healthy environment is the right thing to do.”

***PaperCity Network Editorial Director Chris Baldwin contributed to this report.***

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